

## Goodnight, Sweet Caroline by extraordinary\_fangrl

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**Summary:**

Mike, Eleven, and a tiny human. What could possibly go wrong?

Part 7 of Not So Little Moments!

# Goodnight, Sweet Caroline

## Author's Note:

Happy Spring!

No warnings this time, besides heart-bursting fluff!  
Enjoy!

Bloomington, Indiana

October 4, 1996

Children were enigmas.

Mike loved puzzles, riddles, anything that required him to exercise his brain - *his strongest muscle*. D&D, sudoku, every web of code he knitted for his software, they all made him feel invulnerable. Like there wasn't anything he couldn't decipher, with **and** without the challenge. However, today was different because he had been tasked with babysitting. Possibly the greatest maze he could ever explore **while** preserving his sanity.

The job itself wasn't an entirely new experience for him, as he had watched Holly a few times during his later years of high school. Some of those nights took place under another pair of eyes, but he had survived unscathed. Hell, he even liked spending time with her (a luxury they lost as soon as he moved to Boston), so he made the most of every second. Even if half of them involved his cloaked inquiries about school, or the Joey kid she had always blabbered about during dinner.

Those moments had been wholesome enough to refine Mike's paternal instincts for his child. But there was an outlier on the graph, tainting his confidence with its minuscule yet horrifying radius. For the first time, babysitting lived up to its name. He was responsible for the well-being of a literal baby for the better part of his weekend.

Also known as the **longest** two days of his life.

Of course, he was exaggerating just a tad thanks to his recent “Couvade Syndrome” diagnosis. The problem solver in him stockpiled everything he could find on the condition after his visit to the clinic, just as he did when the “honeymoon phase” of his wife’s pregnancy news had withered. Knowing about his ailment didn’t ease his inflamed anxieties or aid him in his fourth attempt at unlocking the door.

This janky hunk of wood he was forced to entrust with his privacy. At least for the remainder of their lease, which was set to end *way* past El’s due date.

“Few more months, Mike. Just hang in there a **few more months**, and you’ll have enough money to move out of this shithole. Nice house, white picket fence, and a... working door!”

Another clockwise turn and the lock detached with a harsh click. He turned the knob and pushed, a groan heaving from his lungs. One potent inhale sustained his entrance into the apartment, the front door shutting behind the swaying bags in his grasp. When his scan drifted to his wife though, his breathing began to slow.

She was her usual radiant self, beaming with a contagious glow that would have mesmerized him if he had stared another second. However, something else ripped his attention away, staring him right in the face with its alarming chaos.

It looked like a paper tornado had torn through the apartment while he was gone. Nothing else could explain the hordes of bite-sized handprints, brilliant with every color of the rainbow. Or the mixing bowl on the counter, guarded with cups of Greek yogurt and tubes of food coloring. Except for maybe the culprit **herself**, whose pudgy little fists were daubed in the substance.

El wasn’t exactly *innocent* either, as her own coated fingers were flexed in front of a pair of huge, baby brown eyes.

“You like this color, Carrie Bear? Let’s see how it looks on... your button!”

She tapped the baby’s nose, smothering the soft peak with a splotch

of vivid vermilion. Her handiwork received a burst of squeals from the guest of honor, and her heart swelled at the warmth. Bubbles of laughter broke through her grin, but it dissolved as soon as she spotted Mike at the edge of her vision.

"It's my lunch break, and I take a call from my dearest wife. But instead of her... *endearing* inquiries about my day..."

He walked to the kitchen, stalling behind one house of cabinets as he dumped the groceries onto the counter.

"She corners me with a peculiar shopping list, leaving me hanging with nothing. No goodbye, no affirmations of love, *nada*."

"*She* knew you wouldn't mind more breathing room," she mimicked, her tone just as jeering to match his satirical glare. "You work with numbers all day, *math*. That's stressful, and stress doesn't mix well with babies."

A pout slipped through his stone-like façade at her sharp look. He leaned into the edge of the countertop, tracing a finger along the skin between his nose and upper lip.

"I don't know El... I think she was rather mortified by **Mr. Pringle**. Pretty sure she would have ripped him off if Nancy hadn't saved her."

It was her turn to narrow her eyes, but they rolled to the back of her head before she could do any harm. Once her gaze returned, she found the warmth of his presence in his dark eyes before melting against his touch.

"I did need the extra hour, though. Three supermarkets later, I'm stress free and we've got enough Yoplait to start a frozen yogurt stand. We could put the Girl Scouts out of business," Mike said, the mischievous sparkle in his eyes clouding over with distant haze.

"Unless you have a better idea? And please don't say it involves more face painting."

Upon his cue, her head spun to the high chair. She was too late, as their guest of honor had already gotten her hands on the colorful palette. By the time she could shuffle over with a warm washcloth,

little Caroline had already covered her face in yogurt. Its shade was an eclipsed red, rivaling the former smudge on her nose and El's flushed cheeks.

She sighed, her bouncy house of a heart deflating under the carillons of squealing. The jubilant sound reached its peak once she began her cleanse, wiping off the thick paste with gentle strokes. She kept to one side, the peals of deep, halfhearted snickering flying over her shoulder. She focused on the parameters of a round face - or rather, the sections of skin that couldn't be reached with an eager tongue.

A moist blast cut through the air and her daydream, halting her from moving onto the sticky, balled stubs of fingers. She stepped back, eyeing the back of a *very* plump diaper before meeting the gaze of its owner. Huge eyes gawked her way, silent despite the storm raging beneath the polished, amber surface.

Only a single, paper thin line separated the two polar opposite moods. No matter which side prevailed, or how much longer they evaded the inevitable, the odds weren't in their favor. The gates of hell would *literally* break apart at the seams. And no one could survive the inferno of the apocalypse.

Mike believed he was the first to recognize that truth, every trace of amusement vanishing from his features. However, she caught his curved mouth before it could slip away, her own lips twitching to one end.

He wanted to protest, as every exhausted muscle in his body shuddered at the idea of more exertion. That was the point though, because anything worthwhile took effort. And to be frank, his fatigue paled in comparison to his El's.

She had spent all day tending to their niece's needs, all while caring for herself and the child nested within her womb. Soon, they would be looking after their own little one. Mike would have to work just as hard as he did with his job - possibly even *more* than the weight he shouldered for his marriage. There would be countless sleepless nights and frequent agonizing days. But it was a million times better than following the vitriolic trail of his father's footsteps.

The chances of that **ever** happening existed only in a sick, twisted fantasy.

Mike departed with the linoleum floors in one turn, his fingers kneading over the buttons of his cardigan sleeve. Most had been undone by the time he stopped at the high chair, his arms free and ready to help. Though, they weren't the only parts of him thriving in the liberation. His bundled nerves had also cooled to a crisp blanket, inflating the valiance in his nonchalant tone.

"Heh, jokes on you, Tiny Tyrant. I know what bodily waste looks like."

Despite her initial fussing, he took Caroline into his arms, bracing her head against his shoulders. He avoided her backside, but the noxious fumes persisted against the borders of his breathing space.

Grimy fingers clenched at his collar, defiling the pristine white fabric. He played off the added injury, masking his grimace with a cheeky grin. But El knew better.

*She knew him.*

"Looks can be deceiving. There's more, y'know... steps involved! And wipes, lots of baby wipes," she added, dipping her head. "Besides, I made the mess - I should be the one to clean it."

Her tight-lipped smile was warm when her eyes rebounded to Mike, *too warm*. Once he annexed that to her allusive tone, he was certain of her intent. She was giving him an out and had it been any other circumstance, he would have taken it without another thought. But she had spent all day with the baby - *she* put everything they had been learning these last few months into practice. He was her partner in this uncharted venture, so it was only right for him to do the same. Even navigate the fog with his very own map, no matter how many times he needed to change course.

"No, I can do it. Maybe not as well, but practice makes perfect. They say that too y'know."

She didn't yield just yet, her brows still taut with strain. Before she

could utter the words to convey her worries, he soothed them with a cordial reminder.

***“Compromise***, remember? We take turns in the ring, tag-team and even out the punches. You had a great round, now it’s my turn.”

She pulled a face, but Mike excised it and any leftover traces of her frustration with a soft kiss to her temple. Really, it was more than one peck because his lips didn’t stop there. He nuzzled her nose and each rosy cheek with callous speed, slow enough to leave imprints of warmth in his wake. The final mark of his touch had vanished just as it pressed against her mouth, coaxing a moan from her.

Laughter erupted from his rushed exhale, and her sight returned to her like a pair of steaming Eggo waffles sprung from the toaster. She set her narrowed gaze on her husband, ready and willing to fire when a shrill whimper foiled her plans.

At the sight of tiny, pursed lips, her glowering frown softened.

“Alright, you’re right sweet girl. I’ll let you go now so you can get cleaned up,” El cooed, brushing her thumb across a roll of soft skin. “And a bubble bath, get in between those little paint brushes. We can handle that, can’t we?”

“Psh, of course we can!” Mike rose to his full height **and** her challenge with a broad, dimpled smile.

“Bath and a diaper change. What could go wrong?”

One thing could, apparently.

For a first-timer, he was exceptional in the art of diapering. The warm water had worked wonders for the baby’s hygiene and buzzing energy. By the time he laid her down, she was mellowed to the max, soft chitters bubbling from her lungs instead of the ear-splitting wails he anticipated. It was almost comical really, as her daze reminded him of simpler times. Nights he would strand himself in the sweet warmth of the rolled grass and its ethereal brume.

There was a time when El had been oblivious to his favorite pastime, until she had finally seen her fair share of propaganda one fall

afternoon. It was only a matter of time, as the walls of their alma mater were littered with warnings against smoking/drug abuse. She was too distraught to wait for him to finish his guitar practice, riddled with tears and incoherent pleas by the time she had rushed into the music room. He eased her fears then, swearing off weed (at least the smoking bit) and reassuring her of his apathy for any other substance.

Mike kept that memory to himself when they had regrouped for dinner. It didn't exist outside of his own mind, which maintained the contentment of the evening. His goal was to milk on that peace as long as possible, even to ease their transition into bedtime. Of course, his heart had been in the right place. He read Caroline three stories from their growing library of picture books, made sure she had her bedtime bottle, and changed her diaper before he laid her down. However, one pesky little variable evaded his radar.

Homesickness.

Shrill, ***heart-wrenching*** cries for her parents, who wouldn't appear for another fifty-two hours.

Each wail didn't just slug haymakers at his face, they kicked him down to his knees. Knocked him out cold and tied his frail frame to the bulky trunk of a tree - *in the middle of nowhere* . He was stuck there for a while, even when his body fought to stay mobile. He had tried everything he could think of, and El even experimented with some ideas of her own. But nothing could soothe their niece into a restful slumber.

Eventually, the night carried on, and the apartment reached a stillness. A fitful mewl would break through every quarter of an hour or so, but it never escalated into a sound they couldn't mediate with whispers and snuggles. Soon, those intervals had stretched to thirty minutes, then forty-five, and finally an hour. If the baby was awake, Mike would watch her while El slept, and then she would wake so he could power through a nap of his own.

Somewhere along the way, everyone succumbed to the tranquil darkness.



## *The following morning...*

Time didn't exist in the dream world, and yet Mike could have sworn only a minute had passed when he opened his eyes again. His return to consciousness wasn't voluntary by any means. Even so, he couldn't go back to sleep. The longer his cell phone chimed its humdrum vibration, the quicker he sobered from his tiresome hangover.

He rose from the pillow with a groan, his tousled curls, sprawled over his forehead and into his eyes. Luckily, he didn't need his sight to pluck the phone from its charger.

Or to address whoever the hell was on the other end.

"Thirty seconds... then I'm hanging up," Mike managed.

"Funny, I said the same thing that first week Carrie was born. Except it was fifteen, and your mom wasn't exactly pleased."

He sighed, his stare darting to the digits of his brother in law's number on the lit screen before he pressed the speaker to his ear. "Nancy wouldn't be, that's for sure. I'm kinda glad you called instead of her, though. I already apologized."

"You didn't have to, Mike. She wasn't upset."

Another quiet breath, and he untangled from the covers. He slipped through the door's gape, careful not to disturb the reposed air - apart from the light snores and a soft, breathy grunt.

The line was silent for a beat, save for the white noise slicing through to his eardrum. Then Jonathan returned, his light tone pure from any subtleties.

"OK, Nancy wasn't **that** upset. But you were working, and I'm pretty sure she's forgotten about it already. Eight hours of uninterrupted sleep'll clear your head real fast."

Mike stifled his urge to yawn with a scoff, his lumbering footfalls halting at the refrigerator.

“I don’t know. I’m running on... four?” He slurred, reaching for the handle with his free hand. “Four hours. Haven’t dropped dead yet.

Dark eyes struggled against the blinding white, his broad sight restricting to a narrow scope when he locked onto the second shelf.

“But good for you. Sleep **and** a whole day to do whatever with my sis- no, scratch that. We’ve already got another baby on the way, not giving you any ideas.”

A strangled cough, and Jonathan wasted no time in sputtering a rebuttal to the bold assumption. However, his lengthy reply filtered through one ear and shot out the other.

Mike had been in his own foggy world. It was a miracle he could even stand straight, yet alone hold a conversation and prepare his niece’s morning feed. He cushioned the fridge’s closing with his elbow and shuffled across the kitchen floor, the pads of his feet scuffing against the added friction. The microwave popped open, closing just as fast as he set the chilled bottle on its course to warmth. He was almost lulled further into his daze by the galvanic hums, but a buoyant tune finally sobered him from the fatigue.

The sound washed over him with a dulcet wave, too inane even for its repetitive tempo. Something about the low chimes of the synth-bass sparked his memory, and then he was there. He was in Target, acquainting himself with every aisle in the baby section.

Finally, he had returned to reality, his lips curling at the dimpled corners.

“Unless... I’m too late, and you guys are already restocking on diapers.”

“Nice try, Smartass. *But like I said*, you need them more than I do. Add some footies, one of those sleep sacks, and you’ll be gold-”

Nancy’s strident whispers joggled the connection, halting Jonathan’s flow. Before time could further divide his words, he made his

comeback. Now his words were hurried and lacked their lucidity when they surged through the speaker.

“-And you’ll be golden! Anyways, gotta go. We’ll see you tomorrow for brunch. Give Carrie our hugs and kisses!”

The landline severed with a sharp click, preceding a maddening fit of beeping. The streak was almost incessant until Mike had put it out of its misery, ending the call with a cheap snort. He cast his phone off to the side and fetched the bottle, the pads of his fingers pressing into heat almost as hot as the humid core of the microwave. After washing his hands, he squeezed the milk over his hand, the tepid drops rolling down the sides and into the sink.

A deep and not so subtle yawn seized his attention, drawing his glance to El’s figure. One flick at the light switch, and color filled her shadow as she padded to the kitchen. Her unkempt mane distorted her sight, but that didn’t deter her trek or weaken her hold on the baby. As a matter of fact, her arms only tightened around the small weight.

“Rough night, I take it?”

Her lips twisted into a frown that almost rivaled the loose pout gracing their niece’s face. Though, despite the wispy obstruction, Mike could feel her sultry fire. He deduced the pointed look not even a millisecond after meeting her gaze, but it didn’t escalate to a glare.

“It wasn’t that bad, actually. Way better than sleeping outside, or the hospital,” El shrugged away the chills, her stare roving over the counter. “Hopefully they got a decent night’s sleep. I know I couldn’t.”

The wrinkles vanished from around her eyes when they shot back to a device she knew by heart, stretched wide despite their rapid fluttering.

“Is that why Nancy called? Oh, she must have been so worried!”

“She’s fine, they’re **both** just fine. In fact, they can’t wait to see one of us,” he said, his brows pinched together to support the narrowing

of his eyes. “She’s pint-sized, somewhat likable, and has one hell of an appetite!”

Had little Caroline babbled her first coherent word right then and there, it wouldn’t have been a recital of the foul - yet uninspired - word among the list of cursed language. Food had been her very best friend, especially when it appeared in the form of her morning milk. She gurgled, her baby gibberish calling to the bottle inching closer to her reach despite its slow pace.

She had no qualms of speeding things along.

El’s hold was both detrimental and serviceable to her needs, her hands acting upon the dauntless reach. Despite the fussy grunts and squirming arms, she secured the baby long enough for Mike to offer the bottle. Once it was accepted by quick hands and a just as avid little mouth, her pulse ceased from its rampant marathon.

Slow and steady, her heart soared at the sight before her, and the air swelled with a blissful warmth. One glance to her husband, and she could feel the light beaming over them both. The longer she relished in the brilliance, however, the quicker she identified the shadow seeping through the cracks of his deep-set smile.

Darkness loomed over her harmony and she was ready to fight it with her spirit, as with her former conflicts. Though, after a brief rumination, she realized this was a different battle. Her adversary ran a far more menacing battlefield than her callous Papa, or even the macabre reflection of their own world. It stemmed from the same, dark abyss. But instead of navigating a foreign plane, she walked the trails of her own home.

And it wasn’t just Mike’s fatalistic insecurities she had to face.

Eleven had been wrestling with her own demons ever since she could remember, she just learned how to fight them on her own. Honestly, she preferred things that way, especially when they pertained to her own mind. That way, she could spare others from harm *and* the pesky details she was more than happy to gloss over. Though, for some reason, it was much harder to dismiss her fears of motherhood.

Writing, housekeeping, and even taking care of herself kept her busy to the point she couldn't afford to worry about anything else. It was a good thing at the time. She saw it as a miracle to be granted the early months of her pregnancy. Instead of thinking of her mother and the quiet life that was ripped from them both, she could focus on building a life for her own child. A safer, happier place for them to flourish with little pain and lots of ease.

### **More love.**

With every breath-stealing kick and strong, steady heartbeat, grim thoughts clouded her blue sky. Most were irrational, twisted by the darkest speculations of her imagination. Few were genuine concerns, great enough in weight to overrule her doubts. Yet she wasn't strong enough to cleanse all of them, even with the hopes of tomorrow as their partner. What mattered was that she had another chance - **another day** to voice at least one.

Granted, most of her morning and afternoon had been reserved for the baby's needs. Any free time between the feedings, changings, and playing were spent rejuvenating her own energy. Her husband made that job easy.

True to his role as the infamous Paladin, Mike put himself last, making sure she got some rest and a good meal down the hatch. As soon as their niece had drifted off to sleep, he settled at the couch, sandwich in one hand and his wife's shoulder in another. Lunch proceeded and concluded within a reasonable time frame, but the sweet spot had yet to appear under her radar.

Eleven waited, meshing into the arm supporting her spine. Low voices inhabited the background, as well as the humming fan from their air conditioner. She tuned them out, honing over each fixed thump beneath her ear. Their hearts fell into the same pattern on the twentieth beat, and she pulled away from her reverie with a polished resolve.

"I like the houses in Grandview. The trees there are pretty this time of year."

Mike blinked.

Once, twice, and a third time for good measure. He cut his ties with the glitzy title screen, his chocolate irises scampering to a head of hazelnut curls.

Instead of being sucked into her pool of golden honey, he was met with her crown.

“Yeah, a yard would be nice. I mean, I never really used mine... but that can be our thing.”

“We would need a deck too, like the one Hopper built for the lake house,” El nodded, her chin digging deeper against him. “We can camp in the back every other weekend. You’ll teach MJ how to play the guitar, and I can show him the constellations.”

“What? No,” he objected, shaking his head. “Nope, I’m not- ~~we’re~~ not cursing our son with my god-awful name. Hypothetical or not.”

At last, her head rose from the crook of his neck. She bit her lip to keep herself from exploding at his flustered cheeks. It was too late, though, as the curve of her lips gave it away.

El had been made, but knowing of her merriment didn’t cool his blistering face. Or revive the movements of his fingers at her side, which ceased in their lulling caress.

Her eyelashes flitted up to his gaze. “I happen to think Michael is a perfect name. Smart, brave, just like his dad...”

She hoped her praise had softened her husband’s rigid opposition. Rather than a warm welcome, she was met with the crotchety lines of his brisk frown. Pulling from his embrace, her hand lowered to support her belly while she straightened against the cushions.

“But if it’s really too much, we can just keep the ‘M’ and go with something else. Like Max. That works for a boy *and a girl*.”

A full-on scowl took over his face, its inane pique almost identical to the tamed flames in his glare.

“That’s even worse!”

“Then give me a better one.”

He held her challenging smirk, his bare arms sliding into the nooks of his armpits. His brain swirled with a cyclone of jumbled words. Names without the same sound or lettering of his despicable alias. Four lucky contenders weathered the storm, descending to his vocal cords, then to the peak of his throat. Ahead of their grand entrance, a sharp flurry of hiccups crackled through the charged air.

After the monitor’s boisterous roar to life, its static had kept up with the incessant fussing. Mike’s eyes circled to the table, but he waved his white flag with a pounce to his feet when the little breaths erupted into a full-blown cry. He was quick without the added weight of another human being, which aided in his escape. His grace, however, was still as piss poor as a baby deer learning how to walk.

“I’d think up some new names if I were you, no telling how long I’ll be!”

Really, his cumbersome movements were **worse** underneath their niece’s frank distress. He stumbled with each shrill call. His true misstep lay more with his legs, which were glued to a retrograde footpath.

El slapped a hand against her mouth, but her fingers couldn’t muffle the giggles. The bubbling tremors of her small frame only grew in frequency every time he bumped into their furniture or the wall. She even let her laughter roam free after he had almost planked over the play area.

Alas, Mike bounded from her view. His uproarious barrage of shushing carried on for longer than she could remain still. Her laughter had also died since his exit, giving her breathing room to discover which tasks she could complete within the minute she had to herself. It shouldn’t have taken too much thought, there were only two things she could finish in under fifteen-minutes. Since there were four possibilities, however, she had to choose between them all.

She came to her decision after getting onto her feet, one hand steadying her teetering stance while the other stockpiled the waste left from their afternoon meal. Once she disposed of the trash, she

circled back to the living room.

Her gaze found the catalog of names before she reached the bookshelf. The baby blue spine had been out of range, towering three rows above her head. She could have summoned her powers - a simple gyration of her fingertips and the distance would cease to protect her target. She liked those odds in most situations, as the benefits usually outweighed whatever followed her perilous whisks.

Finding another first name for her baby was a whole other foe entirely. She had tested the others *long* before she settled on a namesake, and even those couldn't hold a candle to Michael. Or Melody, if she was wrong about the sex. Joseph, Nathaniel, Winona - nothing in that book could fill her core with the same fuzzy warmth.

***"... Look at the night and it don't seem so lonely... We filled it up with only two."***

Only Mike could do that.

***"And when I hurt, hurting runs off my shoulders. How can I hurt when I'm holding you?"***

His crooning softened the frantic cries to soft whimpering and the cool stasis of her thoughts.

***"One, touching one..."***

Eleven abandoned the bookshelf, her worries of coming up with the perfect name forgotten as she began shuffling to the couch. Her focus clung to the baby monitor, harder than her grip. **Faster** than the flutters inside her chest, or the thumping beneath her swollen middle.

***"Reaching out - attagirl, Care - touching me. Touching you..."***

She danced, a slave to the rhythm long after his hymns fluxed to buzzing hums. The more she moved - the longer she stroked at each mark left by her eager tap dancer - the clearer her mind became. Soon, a name appeared to her, lighting up the room (and her heart) with its color.



The perfect middle to a new beginning.

**Author's Note:**

El would totally be set on naming her kid after Mike, or Hopper, or anyone of her friends.

...

That's the only hint I'm giving for the baby's name.

Stay tuned for more fluff, angst, even a combo of both! I love hearing constructive feedback, and please bookmark/subscribe for future updates.